

PRESS RELEASE



The Cleveland Museum of Art

Public Relations / 11150 East Blvd. / Cleveland, Ohio 44106 / 216 421-7340

November 27, 1981

FOR RELEASE ON RECEIPT

CAREER OF CLEVELAND-BORN PAINTER R. B. KITAJ TRACED IN RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

The first major retrospective exhibition of works by internationally-acclaimed Cleveland-born painter R. B. Kitaj (pronounced kee-TIE) will be on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from December 16, 1981, through January 24, 1982. Although Kitaj, who has lived and worked in England since 1958, has long been an admired, if controversial, figure in Europe, he is not as well known in the United States. This exhibition, which contains some of Kitaj's most important works, traces the development of his distinctive art from 1958 to 1980. It was organized by Joe Shannon, chief of exhibits and design at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., where it opened this fall. Following the exhibition's Cleveland showing, it will travel to the Städtische Kunsthalle in Dusseldorf, West Germany.

The approximately 45 paintings and 50 drawings in this exhibition, selected from museums, galleries, and private collections in Europe and the United States, illustrate the complexity of Kitaj's art, his wide-ranging interests, and his capacity for working in a variety of styles. Throughout his career he has drawn and painted the human form, first in large-scale, image-laden allegorical paintings, filled with references to history, literature, and contemporary culture, and more recently in beautifully rendered pastel drawings of nude models. While he has experimented with modernist devices in his art, he strongly disagrees with the modernist view that an art work need not have meaning outside of itself. He has attempted to restore art to its traditional role as an instrument of communication, a recorder of history, and a witness to the human condition. And like Picasso, an artist whom he greatly

(more)

admires and with whom he has often been compared, Kitaj has confronted political and moral issues and filled his work with images from his own life.

Kitaj was born Ronald Brooks in Cleveland in 1932, later adopting "Kitaj," the Russian surname of his stepfather. He attended children's classes at The Cleveland Museum of Art from 1937 to 1942, where he reports being deeply impressed by a number of paintings. (A Museum masterpiece not yet in the collection when Kitaj was a student--Picasso's tragic view of life, La Vie--is one of his favorite paintings. He says that he looks at a reproduction of the work once a week.) In 1943 Kitaj's family moved to Troy, New York, and in 1950 he left home to go to sea. For the next four years he traveled the world as a merchant seaman, intermittently studying art in New York City and Vienna. Following two years in the U.S. Army, spent mostly in France, he went to Oxford on the G.I. Bill. He continued his art studies at London's Royal College of Art, where he graduated in 1962.

Because of his friendship with David Hockney and other British Pop-oriented artists and his own use of Pop imagery and styles, Kitaj was at first erroneously labeled a Pop artist. But Kitaj soon demonstrated that he had a unique vision and aims radically different from those of his contemporaries. Intensely interested in literature, particularly modern poetry, he has stated that he would like to do visually what modern poetry has done verbally--to make paintings as difficult, as multileveled, as tough, and as full of human purport as poems by T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound.

One of his best-known paintings, a nightmarish landscape of desolation and death entitled If Not, Not, done in 1974, was inspired by Eliot's epic poem, The Waste Land. Though a fairly recent work, this enigmatic painting, with its fragmented imagery, is more representative of Kitaj's paintings of the 1960s--the works for which he first won critical acclaim. An important painting from this era is The Ohio Gang, 1964, described by Joe Shannon as Kitaj's first "epic" subject picture. The painting,

according to Shannon, depicts the viciousness and exploitation of our times, its "grim and grimy decadence triggering in our minds unavoidable memories of the gangsterlike atmosphere attending the rise of Nazism in Germany." He notes that many of Kitaj's works suggest the tensions of the late 1920s to the early 1940s. Indeed, the horrors of totalitarianism and the tragedy of European Jews are recurrent themes in his work.

Shannon warns, however, against attempting to read Kitaj's complex subject paintings as narratives. "Kitaj's best works don't spell out specific events so much as create an atmosphere of social calamity." In looking at Kitaj's work, he says, "the most important thing is not that we understand what he shows us, but that what he shows us forces us in turn to see the visions within ourselves, visions of our shared humanity."

In the last decade Kitaj has moved away from his fragmented, complex imagery to focus on one or two figures in a coherent setting. The flatness of his earlier forms, which were often silhouettes with no interior modeling, has now given way to figures of greater volume and weight, though his distinctive scrubbed surfaces of thinly applied paint seem relatively unchanged. In 1974 he began working with pastels, a technique which he has employed with greater enthusiasm since seeing an exhibition of Degas's pastels in Paris in 1975.

In a recent interview with London art critic Timothy Hyman, Kitaj discussed the changes in his recent work, past and present influences, and future plans. As to the latter, Kitaj says, "I want to enjoy (suffer) a kind of art-life which makes wider demands on my capacities, skills, and imagination." He acknowledges that he has been greatly challenged by Degas, Picasso, and Matisse--those "protean" masters as he calls them--because they adopted different styles and painted different subject matter in order to express their views of modern life. He explains, "Two crazy polarities introduced by modernism are that you can do everything (Picasso,

(more)

Matisse) and that you must stick to a tight (stylistic) corner. I prefer the first craziness to the much safer second one."

The exhibition is accompanied by a 176-page illustrated catalog which contains essays by Shannon, poet/critic John Ashbery, and Jane Livingston, associate director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., as well as Hyman's interview with Kitaj and a foreword by Hirshhorn Museum director Abram Lerner. The catalog is available at the Museum Sales Desk for \$10.

Kitaj will discuss his work, including the paintings and drawings in the exhibition, at a preview for Museum members on Tuesday, December 15, at 7:00 pm.

Gallery talks on the exhibition will be presented daily at 1:30 pm from December 23 through 29 (except Monday and Christmas Day). A slide-tape examining Kitaj's work and this exhibition will also be shown in the Museum's audio-visual center during the run of the exhibition.

Prompted by Kitaj's interest in modern poetry, the Poets' League of Greater Cleveland will present a special program on Sunday, December 27, at 4:00 pm exploring poetry's influence on painting and painting's influence on poetry. Poetry/Painting: Reflections in a Two-Way Mirror features actor John Buck and Mary Pat Daley, educational director of the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival, reading poems by local writers and selections from the works of John Ashbery, W. H. Auden, Charles Baudelaire, T. S. Eliot, Allen Ginsberg, and other noted writers. Slides of works by Kitaj and other artists will accompany the readings.

The Cleveland showing of R. B. Kitaj is assisted by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council.

#

For additional information or photographs, please contact the Public Relations Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.